

Planning Advisory Note: Strategic Significance

Date: 18/10/2024

1. Background

- 1.1 The Environment Act introduced a requirement for new developments to achieve a biodiversity net gain ('BNG'). This became mandatory for major developments in Feb 2024 and for minor developments in April 2024, unless exempt.
- 1.2 BNG must be measured through the national methodology which involves the completion of a statutory biodiversity metric ('the metric'), an Excel workbook. This assigns a value to existing habitats based on their size, condition, strategic significance and type (distinctiveness). For proposed created or enhanced habitats it also takes account of difficulty, the time it will take to reach its target condition and the distance from any habitat loss. The detail of the methodology is set nationally, except for strategic significance which is established locally. See the [Planning Practice Guidance](#) for more information.
- 1.3 The Environment Act also introduced a new statutory document called the Local Nature Recovery Strategy ('LNRS'). Surrey County Council has been designated as the 'responsible authority' tasked with producing it. Surrey boroughs and districts are 'supporting authorities'. The LNRS will set out a county wide strategic approach to biodiversity restoration.
- 1.4 Defra has published a [user guide](#) for the metric which sets out how strategic significance should be established. It states, "Strategic significance is the local significance of the habitat based on its location and habitat type" and clarifies that:
 - where an LNRS has been published it should be used to determine which habitats have a high strategic significance (see table 7).
 - where an LNRS has not yet been published, strategic significance should be determined through documents specified by the local planning authority that map and describe ecologically important habitats (see table 8).
- 1.5 It also lists examples of the documents that planning authorities can specify. This includes Local Plans.
- 1.6 The LNRS has not yet been published so this planning advisory note specifies the Local Plan for use in determining strategic significance. Once the LNRS has been published, including in draft, this note should no longer be used and the LNRS should be used instead.

2. Applying Strategic Significance

2.1 The [Local Plan](#) consists of the following documents:

- The Local Plan Strategy and Sites 2015-2034 (2019) (the 'LPSS'), and
- The Local Plan Development Management Policies (2023) (the 'LPDMP').

2.2 It contains the following policies which are directly relevant for biodiversity recovery:

- LPSS Policy ID4: Green and Blue Infrastructure,
- LPDMP Policy P6: Protecting Important Habitats and Species, and
- LPDMP Policy P7: Biodiversity in New Developments.

2.3 The Local Plan is a statutory document and the policies it contains are the starting point for decision making. It contains strategic and detailed policies covering the natural environment and is therefore the document specified for the purposes of determining whether habitats have 'high' strategic significance. The following section explains how the policies apply.

Biodiversity Opportunity Areas

2.4 The policies listed above identify the Surrey Biodiversity Opportunity Areas ('BOA') within the Local Authority boundary as the basis of the Local Plan's strategic approach to biodiversity protection and restoration. The BOAs are areas where specific habitat measures will be most effective at producing bigger, better and more joined up habitats. Each BOA has a policy statement that sets out:

- a list of all the priority habitats and species for the BOA, and
- a list of priority habitats with specific targets/objectives for creation and enhancement (this list may be smaller than the list of all priority habitats).

2.5 More information about the BOAs, and the policy statement for each BOA, can be found on the [Surrey Nature Partnership website](#). A scalable map of the BOA boundaries is available on the Council's [planning information map](#).

2.6 When producing a BNG metric, 'high' strategic significance should be accorded to:

- baseline habitats located within or adjacent to a BOA that consist of any of the BOA's priority habitats, and
- creation and enhancement habitats located within or adjacent to a BOA that consist of any of the BOA's target/objective priority habitats.

2.7 In most cases the BOA boundary will include all existing priority habitat for that BOA. However, if a habitat adjacent to a BOA meets the above criteria, it should also be accorded 'high' strategic significance if it directly connects ecologically to a priority habitat within the BOA. Adjacent parcels that are isolated should not be accorded 'high' strategic significance.

Designated sites

- 2.8 The Local Plan also identifies Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI). Habitat parcels that are within or adjacent to a SNCI should also be accorded high strategic significance, both in the baseline and in creation and enhancement, if they align with habitat for which the site is designated.

Other habitats

- 2.9 In accordance with table 8 in Defra's user guide, any habitats that are not accorded 'high' strategic significance as set out above should be accorded 'low' strategic significance.

END